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*Published for the
Bexley Christadelphian Ecclesia (Dawn Fellowship)
by*



*Light Bible Publications,
PO Box 760
Bexley, Kent
DA5 1UB, Great Britain*

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VOLUME SEVENTEEN

NUMBER TEN

JULY /AUGUST 2002

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COVER PICTURE: Felucca on River Nile

Bible Symbols

Rivers

THE SCRIPTURES USE similes and symbols quite extensively in order to present in words, a graphic image, which impresses itself on the mind. When a simile is used it is normally accompanied by the word 'like.' For example, the Children of Israel were fed miraculously in the wilderness and when they saw this God-given food, they described it as 'like' coriander seed, white and tasting like wafers made with honey. Now that immediately gives us an idea what this special food was like. We can imagine it spread upon the ground - little white pearls that tasted of honey. [*Exodus 16.31*]

The Scriptures also use symbols where the word 'like' is not used and where the imagery alone is portrayed. Examples of this are found in the book of Revelation where we read of beasts and living creatures and 24 elders and a lamb. We also read about vials and seals and trumpets. The reader needs to study the passages carefully in conjunction with other Scriptures, in order to understand what the passages are about. At the beginning of the book we are told that it is a message sent by Jesus to the Apostle John using signs or symbols. [*Revelation 1. 1*] The explanation of the symbols is not given in the text as it is with the use of similes. We shall see that the same applies to rivers and their usage in Scripture.

RIVERS AS GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

Rivers often feature in the Bible in a geographical context. For instance, in the book of Genesis we read about four rivers that watered the garden eastward in Eden. [*Genesis 2.10-14*] One of these, the Euphrates is an important river. Along its course can be found the remains of the ancient city of Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian Empire, which is featured in the historical and prophetic books of the Bible. It passes through the region of

Mesopotamia (modern Iran and Iraq) where Abraham was born. Abraham was commanded by God to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees and travel to a land that God would show him. Abraham obeyed God implicitly and his faith was rewarded. God promised him the land of Canaan or Israel as we know it today, for an everlasting possession. God said to him "*Unto thy seed have I given this land from the river of Egypt, unto the great river, the river Euphrates.* [Genesis 15.18] (see map opposite)

Rivers are extremely important geographically, socially and economically. Over the centuries the situation has changed but in Roman times rivers provided a base on which communities grew and developed. Today many towns and cities are established at convenient points such as crossings or bridges because originally the river provided a means of transport and was a convenient meeting place.

In the past rivers often became a natural barrier or a border to a territory. They provided a defence, which was difficult for an invading army to cross. For nearly 700 years the river Euphrates formed the eastern border of the Holy Roman Empire. In the book of Revelation there is a reference to a certain group of people shown in symbol who were 'bound' by the river Euphrates. [Revelation 9.14] This barrier effect of the river was to be circumvented and the tribes formerly contained by it were to be free to send their armies across the river Euphrates.

The book of Joshua tells us about the geographical boundaries of the tribes of Israel after they had conquered the land of Canaan (now Israel) in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. There for instance the river Jordan (running from North to South in Israel today) is described as one of the borders of the tribe of Benjamin. [Joshua 18.20] By the time of King Solomon the borders were extended to encompass the whole land promised to Abraham. (2 Chronicles 9.26) Solomon's kingdom reminds us of the time when Christ will return to rule the world and '*His dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the river (Euphrates) unto the ends of the earth.*' [Psalm 72.8] We can understand from this description that God's kingdom will be worldwide.

The importance of rivers from this brief resume will, therefore, be appreciated. What could be more natural than to use such a common and well-known feature as a river to express other ideas?



Rivers of Bible Lands

THE RIVER NILE

In the Scriptures many kings and rulers are generally referred to as having great pride and thus dishonouring the God of heaven and earth. For example, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of Pharaoh king of Egypt in this way but uses symbology to graphically portray his message:

‘Speak, and say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers, which hath said, My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself... And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste; and they shall know that I am the LORD: because he hath said, The river is mine, and I have made it.’ [Ezekiel 29. 3,9]

Maybe the dragon spoken of here refers to the crocodile or perhaps a serpent. The image this creates in our minds fittingly portrays what the prophet has in mind. Instead of realising that he is dependent on the river, Pharaoh now thinks that he owns it! It is well known that the land of Egypt depends for irrigation upon the great river Nile that runs through the land. At certain times of the year the river floods its banks, laying down very fertile silt on the surrounding land, making it extremely productive. In ancient times the river Nile was so essential to the economy of the land that the people worshipped it like a god for all the benefits it brought to them.

God showed Pharaoh that the Nile was not a god at all and that He alone had control. At the time of the Exodus, God brought 10 terrible plagues on Egypt. He turned the great river into a river of blood and it became an object of revulsion to the people instead of an object of worship. We can see then why Ezekiel spoke in these graphic terms in declaring Pharaoh’s failure to acknowledge the God of Israel.

At one point in Israel’s history, Pharaoh’s armies represented a considerable threat to the nation and the prophet Jeremiah used the symbol of the river in the following way:

‘Egypt riseth up like a flood, and his waters are moved like the rivers; and he saith, I will go up, and will cover the earth; I will destroy the city and the inhabitants thereof.’ [Jeremiah 46.8]

THE RIVER EUPHRATES

In England and many other countries we often see rivers in flood, angry and violent waters chasing people from their homes and spoiling everything people have worked for. This is a very fitting symbol of an advancing army.

We have already referred to the River Nile breaking its banks and the prophet Isaiah uses a similar idea to describe the Assyrians as an invading army. God told Israel through the prophet that, because of their failure to serve God, they would suffer at the hands of the Assyrians through whose land the river Euphrates flowed:

‘Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks: And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.’

[Isaiah 8.7,8]

This is a vivid symbolic description of the much-feared armies of the Assyrians, who swept all before them. They destroyed the pleasant life of the people of Israel because they had disregarded the God who had chosen them and provided for them. We can imagine the chariots rattling along and the infantry creating havoc, desecrating and burning God’s land, destroying His people and taking the spoils of a prosperous nation back to their own land. There was no escape. In fact the Assyrians took captive the population of the Northern Kingdom and led them in chains to Assyria.

Now although Israel was defeated and destroyed by the Assyrians there will come a time when God will intervene in the affairs of men and Israel will be relieved of the oppression it has suffered for so many centuries and does even today. At that time proud nations who have despised and persecuted the Jews will suffer the same fate as Israel in the past. The prophet Zechariah describes these events as follows:

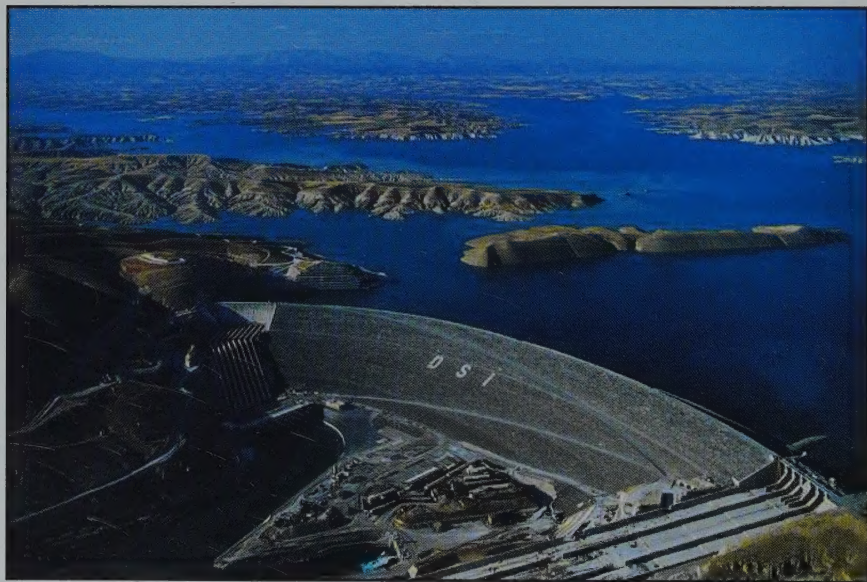
‘And he shall pass through the sea with affliction, and shall smite the waves in the sea, and all the deeps of the river shall dry up: and the pride of Assyria shall be

brought down, and the sceptre of Egypt shall depart away.' [Zechariah 10.11]

The prophet Isaiah also foretold that time when God's people Israel, who have been scattered throughout the world, will be re-gathered and caused to serve their God:

'Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia: That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters, saying, Go, ye swift messengers, to a nation scattered and peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden down, **whose land the rivers have spoiled!**' [Isaiah 18.1,2]

These prophetic words concerning the nations like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon who in the past have desolated the land of Israel like rivers in flood, will have their fulfilment when Christ returns to establish the kingdom of God.



Ataturk dam on the River Euphrates

THE 'DRYING UP' OF THE RIVER EUPHRATES

The book of Revelation mentioned previously, is a book of symbol and it contains an interesting reference in connection with the River Euphrates:

'And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared.'
[Revelation 16.12]

What is to be understood by this symbology concerning the river Euphrates? When we think about this river we realise that although it passes through Syria and Iraq on its way to the Persian Gulf, it rises in the Armenian hills in Turkey. In fact considerable international tension has arisen as a result of the dam that Turkey has constructed along the course of the river to provide irrigation and hydroelectric power. As a result of this, the supply of water to the other nations involved is reduced. (Picture page 6)

In this case the symbol of the river Euphrates represents the Turkish nation just as in the same way the Thames, the Seine and the Rhine can be used to represent respectively England, France and Germany. If this is so what can it mean when the verse requires the river to be '*dried up*'? In what sense can the Turkish nation be described in this way?

We don't have to go far back in history to realise that the nation at one time had a great empire. The Ottoman Empire was once rich and powerful under its Sultans. It enjoyed a very influential position in international politics standing strategically at the meeting place of East and West. But instead of being overthrown like the Babylonians or the Greeks, the Turkish or Ottoman Empire slowly began to disintegrate. The power they had enjoyed began to diminish and over time parts of the geographical territory of the Empire was lost for a variety of reasons.

THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Here is a brief history of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. All the countries mentioned in this list were once a part of the Ottoman Empire ruled by the Sultans of Turkey.

1830	Greek independence
1860	Civil war in Lebanon
1866	Insurrection in Crete
1875	Empire declares bankruptcy
1876	Revolution in Bosnia and Herzegovina War against Serbia and Montenegro
1877	Russo-Turkish war
	Parliament dissolved and Constitution suspended
1878	Beginning of Bulgarian independence (Treaty of Berlin)
1881	France invades Tunisia
1882	Britain invades and controls Egypt
1895	Civil war in Macedonia
1908	Bulgaria fully independent
	Crete unites with Greece
	Young Turks Revolution – Sultan overthrown
1912	Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria attack European Turkey
1917	British forces occupy Baghdad and Palestine
1918	Civil war and war with Greece
	Armistice with Allied powers
	Beginning of emergence of independent Arab States
	Establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine
1948	Declaration of the State of Israel

This is why the Turkish Empire was described during its decline as the 'sick man of Europe.' The Turkish power had controlled the land of Palestine for many years and it was not until the First World War that the land was released from Turkish rule. This is what is meant by the expression in the book of Revelation *'that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared.'*

The way had to be prepared for the Jews to return to their own land. [Ezekiel chapter 37] Up until that point it was not possible because of the Turkish rule, but after the First World War the land was able to receive them. However, it was not until the end of the Second World War that the Jews returned in large numbers to the land of Palestine despite great opposition from their enemies.

The modern state of Israel has existed for the last half century and this is

also a fulfilment of prophecy. However, when Israel dwells in her own land disaster will strike and an invading force will completely overrun the nation. [Ezekiel chapter 38] This will be a time of deep distress for Israel. In her extremity she will be saved by the re-appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ who will save the nation from apparent extinction and its people will recognise their Messiah who they crucified. [Zechariah chapter 12]

Christ and his faithful followers (often referred to in the Scriptures as the saints) are to be the new rulers of the earth. It will be the privilege of his saints to live and reign with Him on the earth. [Revelation 20. 4] Not surprising then that the Scriptures refer in symbol, to these immortalised people as the '*kings of the East*' or to use an alternative translation of the original Greek - '*kings from a Sun's rising*.'

The symbol of the drying up of the river Euphrates is a great sign of the return of Jesus to bring peace to a war torn world and to teach the real Gospel message to all nations.

A PEACEFUL RIVER

We have been thinking of rivers in spate but of course, there is also something lovely about a river, which glides along its course clear and fresh reflecting the heavens in its mirror-like surface. A mental picture like this draws the attention and brings a sense of calm to the troubled mind. The Scriptures, as we might expect, use this idea too to remind us of the great changes to come when God's kingdom is established on earth:

'For thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream...' [Isaiah 66.12]

'There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.' [Psalm 46.4]

The words of the prophet Joel add to this word picture of the kingdom of God:

'And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with

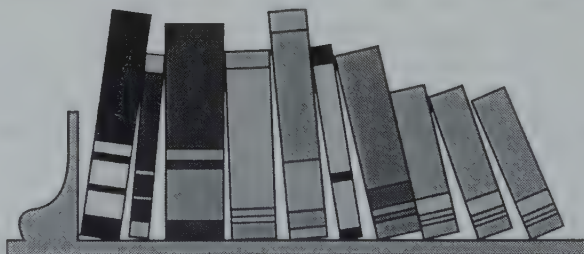
milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the LORD, and shall water the valley of Shittim.' [Joel 3.18]

As we look around the world today we see the turmoil which human rulers are unable to control. War, social unrest, crime, hatred are all features of the modern age. However, man's inability to rule will be superseded by Christ's righteous and powerful reign when all nations will accept His supremacy and submit to the law of God. The words of the Psalmist already referred to, add to the words of Israel's prophets in giving a striking word picture of the age to come:

'In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth...Yea all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him' [Psalm 72.7,8,11]

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Basic Bible Teaching

The Resurrection

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

FOR MANY PEOPLE the thought that loved ones may have perished forever and their thoughts and actions confined to oblivion in death, is too painful to think about. Most religious people place their hope in a belief that the souls of their loved ones live on after death and ascend to heaven, to a fuller life of joy and happiness forever.

The Bible does hold out a hope of life after death but it tells us nothing about immortal (i.e. never dying) souls or spirits going to heaven at death. It speaks rather of a resurrection, that is, the restoring of the dead person to life, at a specific time in the future, called the 'Last Day.' Those who are resurrected will then be subject to the judgement seat of Christ and those who are approved will have their bodies changed from being mortal (i.e. subject to death) to equality with the angels, to die no more.

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

The doctrine of the resurrection is so indelibly inscribed in the pages of the Bible that even those who believe in immortal souls have to acknowledge it, though they cannot understand it. For example, the Church Creeds testify of the Lord Jesus Christ that 'he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick (living) and the dead'.

To judge the dead requires that they be raised from the dead and so a little later on we read: 'I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of

the world to come.' [*The Nicene Creed in the Book of Common Prayer*] The Apostles Creed has similar words.

Some theologians try to combine this doctrine of the resurrection with the idea of immortal souls by claiming that at the resurrection, souls will be reunited with their resurrected bodies but in fact the two beliefs are incompatible. Disembodied souls cannot live in perfect joy, knowing that one day they are going to suffer the limitation of being recombined with earthly bodies. Neither would there be room for a future judgement, because it would be illogical for a soul to ascend to paradise at death, only to be judged unworthy later on. There are insuperable problems in believing that immortal souls go to paradise at death while at the same time believing in a future resurrection and judgement.

Many Christians have abandoned the doctrine of a literal resurrection in favour of belief in the immortality of the soul at the death of the body. Yet the resurrection of the body is clearly taught in the Scriptures, whereas the idea of immortal souls is not, being a man made doctrine of pagan origin. Christadelphians believe only what the Bible teaches, so we accept that there will be a future resurrection and judgement, and reject the idea of immortal souls.

IS THE RESURRECTION SPIRITUAL?

Some have tried to harmonise these two incompatible beliefs by spiritualising the resurrection, saying that Christians have already been resurrected to a new life in Christ. There is undoubtedly a sense in which that is true. The Apostle Paul refers to believers who are baptised undergoing such a resurrection:

'Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection' [*Romans 6.4,5*].

Here Paul compares the emergence of believers from the waters of

baptism to the resurrection of Christ. The old sinful body is left behind and we obtain a new body devoted to Christ's service. In that sense the believer is subject to a spiritual resurrection at baptism. However, that is only a figurative resurrection; the Scriptures also clearly refer to a literal resurrection in the future.

BIBLE REFERENCES TO THE RESURRECTION

For example, there is the declaration of Martha, whose brother Lazarus had just died. When Jesus tried to comfort her with the knowledge that Lazarus would rise again, she said: *'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'* [John 11.24]

Jesus replied that she was not mistaken but that he was the one through whom this great miracle would be accomplished, saying: *'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.'* [John 11.25]

On another occasion Jesus told the Saducees, a sect who denied that there is any resurrection, that they erred because they knew not the Scriptures (referring to the Old Testament) nor the power of God. [Matthew 22.23-32] He went on to prove the resurrection from a passage in the Old Testament. [Exodus 3.6]

Paul comforted bereaved disciples of Christ with the hope of a resurrection in these words:

'But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep (a common way of referring to death in the Scriptures), that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.' [1 Thessalonians. 4.13,16]

Neither Jesus nor Paul comforted bereaved disciples with the modern idea that their loved ones were in paradise. The reference to the trump (or trumpet) of God is repeated in Paul's famous discourse on the resurrection:

‘Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.’ [1 Corinthians 15.51-54]

Paul and Peter both use those words quoted in the creeds, that Jesus is coming to judge ‘*the quick (living) and the dead.*’ [Acts 10.42; 2 Timothy 4.1; 1 Peter 4.3] Thus the Scriptures frequently speak of a literal resurrection and judgement when Christ returns to establish his kingdom on the earth.

WHO WILL BE RAISED FROM THE DEAD?

Jesus, in those words to Martha, said that ‘*he that believeth on me*’ will be raised. This implies that those who do not believe will not be raised. In the passage above from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, he confirms that there are some who have no hope. In the Old Testament we read of those who will sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake (Jeremiah 51.39,57) and of those who are dead and will not live. (Isaiah. 26.14) Both Old and New Testaments therefore agree that not all persons who have ever lived will be raised. It is true that in one place Jesus said that all who are in the grave will be raised. His words are:

‘Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which **all** that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.’ [John 5.28,29]

However, the ‘**all**’ mentioned here doesn’t mean every person that has ever lived, but **all those** to whom the words were addressed, otherwise it would contradict those passages quoted above. Those who don’t know God or his laws will simply remain forever in what the Bible calls ‘the congregation of the dead.’ Of those who know God’s laws, some will have obeyed them to the best of their ability, while others will have rejected or deliberately disobeyed them, and the Scriptures require that both these classes will be raised and judged. Daniel, in the Old Testament, says of them:

‘And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’ [Daniel 12.2]

Paul likewise, in his defence before Felix, declared that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. [Acts 24.15] Summarising these passages, it is clear that the majority of people, who do not know God, will not be raised, but remain forever in the grave. However, all those who know of God’s laws will be raised from the dead and judged. Those accepted will be given eternal life, and those rejected will be consigned to the grave again eternally in ‘*the Second Death.*’ [Revelation 20.6]

Some have thought that, from the time of Christ, only those who have been baptised will be raised and judged, but that would mean that any who know the commands of Christ and deliberately choose not to be baptised would not be judged. Those who know God’s will and deliberately disobey it are responsible to Divine judgement and must be raised from the dead even though they were not baptised. Baptism is important, but it is an act of obedience to knowledge. Knowledge comes first and this brings responsibility to God’s commandments.

THE NATURE OF THOSE RESURRECTED

Because Paul stated that ‘*the dead shall be raised incorruptible*’, some have assumed that only the righteous will be raised, and that they will be raised as immortal beings, but this cannot be the correct interpretation. Paul himself insists that both the just and the unjust will be raised and judged, and obviously, those raised but rejected will not be raised incorruptible; as Jesus said in that quotation from John chapter five, some will be raised to damnation, (i.e. condemnation). To assume that all will be raised immortal or incorruptible would be to pre-empt the Judgement Seat, so Paul must have been referring only to the resurrection of those who will be approved. They will be made incorruptible at the Judgement Seat, but those not approved will be eternally destroyed.

There is also another group that will be called away to judgement, those believers who are still alive at the second coming of Jesus. These are the ‘quick’, or living, referred to in those Bible passages quoted above. Paul also refers to them as those ‘*which are alive and remain unto the coming of the*

Lord.' [1 Thessalonians 4.15] Both the living and the resurrected dead will be of the same human nature, subject to death, unless and until they are approved at the Judgement Seat.

Those who are raised will have the same nature that they possessed before they died. This does not necessarily mean that they will be raised in the same state that they were in when they died. God is all-powerful and he can raise the body in any state that he wishes. If persons who died of, say, a heart attack were raised in the same state in which they died, they would immediately die again of the same cause, so they must be raised in a state of health. It is possible that those who have lost a limb, for example, will be raised in the state they were in before the limb was lost. The Scriptures are silent on this issue but we can be confident that God will do all things wisely. What we are told is that those rewarded with everlasting life will be made perfect in body and mind. In the delightful words of the prophet Isaiah:

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert ... And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' [Isaiah 35.5,6,10]

We want you to share with us that wonderful hope for the future.

Keith Deadman
West Midlands, England

Acknowledgements

<i>Cover picture</i>	<i>Corbis Corporation</i>
<i>Pages 6 and 19</i>	<i>Corbis Corporation</i>
<i>Page 23</i>	<i>Private collection</i>

Women of Faith

Ruth and Naomi

‘YOUR PEOPLE WILL be my people and your God my God.’ *[Ruth 1.16 NIV]*
A young girl spoke these words to her mother-in-law Naomi many years ago. It was a simple statement and more likely to be uttered by a daughter to her mother - but then the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth is comparable to a mother and daughter. It was a relationship of trust and affection that ultimately for both of them, brought wonderful blessings from the God of Israel.

BEGINNINGS

Ruth and Naomi lived in Old Testament times, during the period of the Judges. We are told that Naomi, along with her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion came from Bethlehem in Judah. Due to famine, they decided to leave their home and went to live in Moab. Great sadness was soon to be experienced by Naomi. Firstly she was bereaved of her husband and then her two sons. *[Ruth 1.3-5]* Only her two daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth remained. Hearing that there was no longer famine in the land of Judah, these three women decided to make their way back and settle in Bethlehem. Both Orpah and Ruth it would seem, were willing to leave their land and follow Naomi but as the story progresses there is only one daughter-in-law who remained with her mother-in-law.

The obvious affection that existed between these three women, reminds us of the importance of good family relationships. Harmony and trust make a good foundation in any family relationship, especially at a time of bereavement. Despite the close relationship enjoyed by Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, Naomi felt obliged to urge her daughters-in-law to return to their own land. She could see no reason why they should stay with her. After all there

would be no more sons for them to marry and they would be free to find themselves husbands in Moab. Orpah didn't need much persuading and eventually returned to Moab.

No amount of persuading could make Ruth leave Naomi and she pleaded with her mother-in-law: *'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.'* [Ruth 1.16,17 NIV] With these emotional words it became apparent to Naomi, that this young girl had no wish to return to the ways of the Moabites but instead, to follow her way of life and the Jewish faith.

LEARNING TO TRUST IN GOD

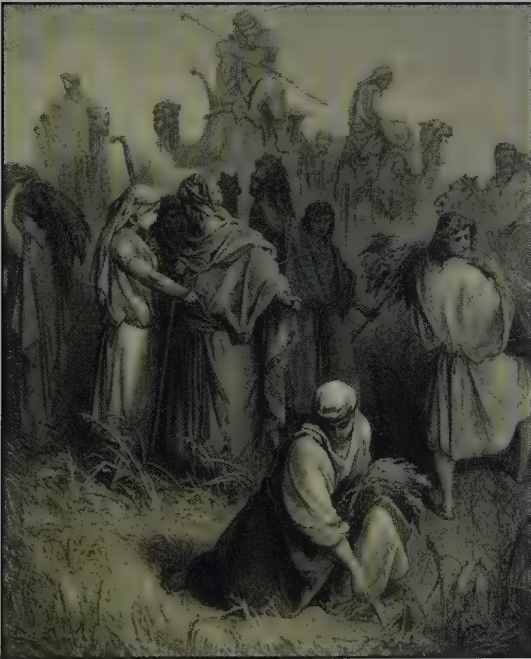
Naomi returned to Bethlehem filled with sadness declaring that God had given her a heavy burden to bear. She had left Judah full and was now returning empty. Sometimes this is the lot of God's servants; burdens are brought to bear and the load seems heavy indeed. Yet the chastisement of the Lord is but for a moment [Psalm 30.5] and always there is the promise of better things to come: *'...and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.'* [Isaiah 35.9,10 NIV] In the book of Psalms, we learn that: *'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees, the law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver or gold.'* [Psalm 119.71,72 NIV] Naomi was to learn that although she had been cast down, the Lord would bless her and in Ruth, she would find the greatest blessing of all.

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Although he was sinless, Jesus accepted the chastisement of the Lord. He was despised and rejected of men, [Isaiah 53.3] he was belittled and spat upon, [Matthew 26.67,68] forsaken by those he loved and who professed to love him, [Matthew 26.56] bereft of human compassion and comfort. Yet the Lord did not forsake him and ultimately raised him up from his lowly mortal state and bestowed upon him honour and glory [Acts 2.22-36] and the greatest reward of all, eternal life. [Acts 2.24] In the same way, the Lord had certainly not forsaken Naomi and Ruth.

THE KINSMAN-REDEEMER

The two women came to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest, around Passover. This feast of Passover was a time of great significance when the Children of Israel recalled their flight and ultimate redemption from the bondage of Egypt. [Exodus chapter 12] Naomi had a near kinsman named Boaz, a relative on her husband's side of the family who lived in Bethlehem. According to Jewish Law, Boaz was in line to act as 'redeemer' for the property of the deceased Elimelech, and to marry Ruth. [Deuteronomy 25.5-10] But there was a problem - the Law expressly prohibited the Moabites from eligibility for marriage among the Jewish people. [Deuteronomy 23.3] This was because they had denied sustenance to the Jews when they wanted to travel through their territory on the way to the Land of Promise. [Numbers chapter 21]



Boaz and Ruth (engraving by Dore, 1866)

So this would have excluded Ruth from marriage to Boaz. But again we see the hand of God working in the lives of His chosen servants. A small oral tradition allowed for marriage between a Jewish man and a woman from Moab, providing that they had not personally participated in any way in anti-Jewish crimes. How wonderful that Ruth a Moabitess could trust in the God

of Israel and find comfort in His redeeming hand. We might think upon this fact and ponder that those outside the Jewish faith have the opportunity of becoming related to God and His promises through His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. [Galatians 3.6-14]

GLEANNING IN THE FIELD OF BOAZ

Ruth went into a field that happened to be owned by Boaz, to glean barley. (Picture page 19) Now this was perhaps one of the lowliest jobs that a person could undertake, they would literally be cleaning up after the gatherers. Under the Law of Moses, the stranger, orphan and widow were allowed to gather any fallen crop. [Leviticus 23.22] Ruth fulfilled these criteria, being both an alien and widow in the land. She worked diligently and this did not go unnoticed by those around her. Again we recall the Lord Jesus Christ, who humbled himself in his life, pleasing his Father in heaven by the way he conducted himself as he went about his daily work.

This was a time of great rejoicing in Judah, for God had blessed the land with abundant crops. Boaz noticed Ruth but she was not reprimanded for gleaning in his field. Instead, in accordance with the requirements of the law, which Boaz upheld, he asked her to stay. [Ruth 2.8,9]

THE HAND OF GOD AT WORK

As the story progresses, we can clearly see the hand of God working in the lives of these people. Twists and turns brought about a string of events that eventually lead to extraordinary blessings for all those involved. Boaz acknowledged this when he said to Ruth:

‘May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge’

[Ruth 2.12 NIV]

Ruth is told by Naomi to dress in her best clothes and go to Boaz who is working in his threshing barn. Interestingly the name Boaz has the meaning of ‘In him is strength.’ This is a fitting name for a man who possessed great strength of character. The nature of Boaz was one of grace and kindness, and no doubt these attributes drew Ruth to him. Although he was a wealthy man,

he looked down upon the impoverished Ruth with favour. We might further say that Boaz was a 'type' of Christ in his actions. Ruth was a Gentile, from outside the Jewish faith, poor and without status and standing, yet Boaz showed her great kindness and impartiality. Ruth also had no other help but Boaz, only he could redeem her from her predicament. We can compare his actions with the Lord Jesus Christ, whose love and compassion have been extended to the Gentiles who were once outside the Jewish hope. [*Ephesians 3.6*]

Later that night as Boaz slept, Ruth lay down at his feet and when he awoke she revealed her identity and made her request known. She asked Boaz to be the redeemer of Elimelech's property and to marry her. But it would seem that there was a problem. There was a nearer kinsman than Boaz, whose right it was to redeem Elimelech's property and to marry Ruth. But when this man learned that Ruth was a Moabitess, he felt that he could not marry her, as it would put his estate in jeopardy. [*Ruth 4.6*] Boaz hears of this and at once announces that he will act as redeemer and marry Ruth.

Again, our thoughts turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was willing to lay down his life for us, the Gentiles. [*Acts 14.27; Acts 26.23*] Boaz acted in much the same way. He rescued Ruth (a Gentile) from her predicament after the rightful redeemer-kinsman (a Jew), refused to take up his inheritance. We know from Scripture that the Jews were chosen by God to be His people and the inheritors of His Kingdom on earth. [*2 Samuel 7.12-16; Isaiah 2.2,3; John 4.22*] However, their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah-king, eventually opened up the way for the Gentiles to be grafted into the Jewish family through faith in the Lord Jesus. [*Romans chapter 11*]

BLESSINGS FROM GOD

From the moment Boaz and Ruth meet, blessings appear. Ruth finds kindness, mercy, grace and favour with a man of great standing. The poverty that she and Naomi suffered had come to an end. Ruth had been redeemed from her lowly state and united to Boaz in marriage. She would share with him a home, wealth and the joys of a truly blessed union. When Jesus returns to this earth, he is to be united with his Bride, who will enjoy the blessings of eternity with the Bridegroom. [*Revelation 21.9*]

God had indeed richly blessed both Naomi and Ruth for their trust in

Him. Yet still to come was the greatest blessing of all. A son was born to Boaz and Ruth whose name was Obed, who in turn was the father of Jesse and he was the father of King David. How wonderful is the outworking of the Divine plan in the lives of His chosen servants.

The book of Ruth is a beautifully simple story of love, trust, dedication and faith in God. It followed a time in Israel's history when disobedience, idolatry, unbelief and sinfulness reigned. The story of Ruth is like a ray of sunshine at a time of darkness in Israel's history and reminds us vividly that God's ultimate plan for salvation and reconciliation will succeed. Throughout the pages of Scripture, we come across people who were not Jews by birth, yet they are included in God's Word as fitting examples of characters who lived out their lives in faith and obedience to Him. In Matthew chapter one the genealogy of Jesus Christ includes two Gentile women who were in the line of the Son of God - Rahab the harlot, and wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz [*Ruth 4.20*] and Ruth the Moabitess, and wife of Boaz.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Little did Naomi and Ruth know that when they left the fields of Moab to travel back to Judah, wonderful things would be in store for them both. After much heartache, grief and sadness these two women were richly blessed in their lifetime and will no doubt be further blessed in the life to come at the Resurrection.

For all of God's children the road ahead is unknown. Yet if we have the faith of Ruth and Naomi trusting in the God of Israel, whose arm is never too short to save, then we can be assured that in His mercy at the end of our life-story we can share the hope of eternal life. At the return of **our** Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth, we will not appear as a stranger to him, but as a friend. We shall then be redeemed from the power of sin and welcomed into his kingdom by these words:

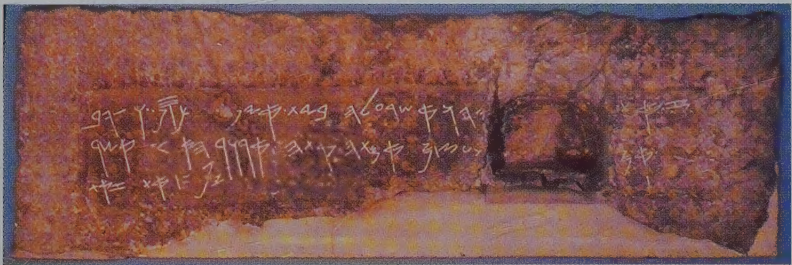
'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; **take your inheritance**, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' [*Matthew 25.34 NIV*]

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Bible Truths

The Tomb of the Royal Steward

ADJACENT TO THE ancient city of David in Jerusalem, on the eastern side of the Kidron valley lies the Arab town of Silwan. Cut into the rocky hillside are many tombs, long since emptied of their contents, with some now used as dwellings for Arab families. One of these tombs is called 'The Tomb of the Royal Steward' because of an inscription carved in the solid rock lintel over the doorway.



Inscription from Royal Steward's tomb

In 1870 a French archaeologist named Charles Clermont-Ganneau recognised the importance of this inscription. To preserve the writing, with the help of the British Consul, he made a deal with the Arab owners of the site, who allowed him to cut the inscription out of the rock and it eventually found its way to the British Museum where it is now on display. We can see for ourselves these engraved words referring to the burial place of a high official of one of ancient Israel's most notable kings, Hezekiah king of Judah

For many years the block of stone laid in the museum undeciphered until in 1953 the distinguished archaeologist Nahman Avigad of the Hebrew University offered a translation that is accepted by most scholars today. The carved writing has been marked with a white pigment to make the Hebrew letters easier to read and it tells us that *'This is the sepulchre of ...yahu who is over the house. There is no silver and no gold here but his bones and the bones of his amah with him. Cursed be the man who will open this.'*

The words *'who is over the house'*, are a title and are more accurately rendered as 'Royal Steward', a man with personal responsibility for the royal household. The style of the Hebrew lettering dates the inscription clearly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. This script was not used much after this period, so the tomb with its inscription is placed very clearly in the seventh century BC.

Now the amazing thing is that in the time of King Hezekiah the prophet Isaiah was told by God to denounce Hezekiah's royal steward for making a tomb for himself in the place where the Kings of Israel were buried:

'This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says: Go, say to this steward, to Shebna, who is in charge of the palace: What are you doing here and who gave you permission to cut out a grave for yourself here, hewing your grave on the height and chiselling your resting place in the rock?' [Isaiah 22.15,16.NIV]

Although part of the name on the inscription has been destroyed, most scholars believe that the name found here is the name Shebna in its fuller form of Shebaniah or Sebanyahu. (see Nehemiah chapter nine verse four).

Many distinguished scholars of today are certain this is the tomb prepared for that man who served King Hezekiah. Here we have more archaeological evidence confirming the accuracy of the Biblical narrative that we have been given for our guidance.

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